Personal Space Around the World

How Close Is Too Close? | Level B1 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. How close do you usually stand to a friend when you talk? How close do you stand to a stranger?
2. Where do you often have to stand close to strangers? How does it feel?
3. How might people's need for personal space differ by country, gender, age, or personality?

Reading: Personal Space Around the World

Imagine you are alone in an elevator. A stranger gets in and stands right next to you, although there is plenty of room. You feel **awkward**, and you probably step away. The invisible area around your body is called personal space. Most people only notice it when someone tries to **invade** it.

Many people picture personal space as a **bubble** that moves with them. In the 1960s, the American **anthropologist** Edward Hall **observed** how close people stood in different situations. He described four zones, from a very close zone for hugging to a far zone for speaking in public. But his notes came from people in the United States, and he said his numbers were not **strict** rules.

Distances **vary** a lot around the world. In one large survey, nearly 9,000 people in 42 countries showed how close a stranger could stand before they felt uncomfortable. People in Argentina chose about 80 centimeters, and people in Romania chose about 140. Women and older people **tended to** choose a little more space. People in warmer countries preferred slightly less distance, but nobody knows for sure why. The survey also **challenges** some **stereotypes**. For example, some people believe that everyone in the Middle East stands very close. Yet people in Saudi Arabia chose one of the widest distances for strangers.

The situation matters too. On a **crowded** train, people stand close because they have no choice. Many of them look at their phones to create some distance in their minds.

So what should you do when you meet people from other countries? First, do not **assume** that you know what is normal for them. Someone who stands close is probably not trying to be rude. Second, watch for **signals**. A person who feels too close may lean back, turn away, or step back. Third, if you are not sure, leave a little more room. If you stand too close, you may **offend** someone. If you stand too far away, you may **come across as** cold.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

bubble	**assume**	**observed**	**signals**	**anthropologist**	**offend**	**challenges**	**strict**	**crowded**
awkward	**stereotypes**	**invade**	**tended to**	**vary**				

1. I felt _____ when everyone looked at me and I did not know what to say.
2. It is rude to _____ someone's privacy by reading their diary.
3. Many people think of personal space as an invisible _____ around the body.
4. An _____ studies the customs and beliefs of different societies.
5. The teacher _____ the class for an hour and made notes on how the students worked.
6. The school has a very _____ rule about being on time.
7. Prices _____ a lot between different cities.
8. When we were children, we _____ play outside until it got dark.
9. The new evidence _____ the idea that cities are always noisy.
10. Many _____ about teenagers are wrong, such as the idea that all of them love loud music.
11. The shopping street was too _____ for us to walk quickly.
12. Do not _____ that he knows the way. Ask him first.
13. A yawn and a look at the clock are _____ that a person wants to leave.
14. I am sorry if my joke seemed to _____ you. I did not want to upset anyone.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. an awkward	_____	**a.** from place to place
2. invade	_____	**b.** rule
3. a strict	_____	**c.** as friendly
4. vary	_____	**d.** someone's privacy
5. challenge	_____	**e.** silence
6. a crowded	_____	**f.** signals
7. send mixed	_____	**g.** a stereotype
8. come across	_____	**h.** train

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. Don't make an _____ about people from other countries. (*assume*)
2. I'm sorry. My comment was not meant to be _____. (*offend*)
3. Careful _____ can teach you a lot about another culture. (*observe*)
4. There is a lot of _____ in how close people stand. (*vary*)
5. Edward Hall worked in _____, the study of human cultures. (*anthropologist*)
6. Phones are _____ not allowed during the exam. (*strict*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. Why does the person in the elevator feel awkward?

2. What did Edward Hall do?
3. Why are Hall's numbers not true for every country?
4. In the survey, which country chose a smaller distance from strangers, Argentina or Romania? Give the numbers.
5. What did the survey find about women and older people?
6. What did the survey find about warmer countries, and how sure are we about the reason?
7. Why does the writer mention Saudi Arabia?
8. Why do many people on a crowded train look at their phones?
9. Do you think the writer's advice in the last paragraph is useful? Give two reasons.
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Edward Hall collected his distance numbers in 42 different countries."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that a person who stands close to you is probably being rude."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin with a story about an elevator? Is it (a) to describe a situation most readers know, (b) to prove that elevators are too small, or (c) to explain how Hall collected his data?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. Personal space is the invisible area around your body. **T / F**
2. Edward Hall was a British scientist. **T / F**
3. Hall described four zones of personal space. **T / F**
4. Hall said that his numbers were strict rules for everyone. **T / F**
5. People in Romania chose a bigger distance from strangers than people in Argentina. **T / F**
6. The survey found that everyone in the Middle East stands very close. **T / F**
7. The researchers know exactly why people in warmer countries chose less distance. **T / F**
8. Women and older people tended to choose a little less space. **T / F**
9. People who feel too close may lean back or step back. **T / F**
10. On a crowded train, many people look at their phones. **T / F**

Language Focus: Zero and First Conditionals

Both forms use **if** + present simple in the *if* clause.

Zero conditional (general truths and habits): *if* + present simple, present simple. *If I'm tired, I go to bed early.*

First conditional (a real possibility in the future): *if* + present simple, *will / may / can* + base verb. *If it rains tomorrow, I'll stay home.*

From the reading:

"**If** you **stand** too close, you **may offend** someone."

"**If** you **stand** too far away, you **may come across as** cold."

Tip: The *if* clause can come first or second. Use a comma only when it comes first: *If I'm tired, I go to bed early. / I go to bed early if I'm tired.*

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you.

Zero conditional (what usually happens)

1. If I feel awkward in a crowded elevator, I usually _____
2. If I don't get enough sleep, I _____

3. If someone is rude to me, I usually _____

First conditional (a real possibility in the future)

4. If I finish my work early this week, I will _____
5. If it rains this weekend, I _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to use a zero or first conditional with if. *Then ask a partner.*

6. What do you usually do if you can't sleep at night?
7. What happens if you forget your phone at home?
8. What will you do if you have free time this weekend?
9. What will you say if a stranger stands too close to you on the bus tomorrow?
10. If a friend from another country visits you next month, where will you take them?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. Have you ever been in a situation where someone stood too close to you? What did you do?
2. Do you feel awkward in elevators, lines, or other small spaces? What do you do to feel more comfortable?
3. How do people in your country behave on a crowded bus or train? Do you think this is the same everywhere?
4. Have you ever lived or studied in another country? Which daily habits surprised you?
5. Has anyone ever stood too far away from you? How did it make you feel about that person?
6. Hall's notes came only from people in the United States. Why can numbers from one group be a problem for other groups?
7. Do people in your family or group of friends like different amounts of space? Why might that be?
8. Is it possible to be too careful about personal space when you meet people from other cultures?
9. How can a person say politely that someone is standing too close?
10. The survey asked people what distance they prefer. Why might what people say be different from what they really do?
11. Do video calls and messages change how we think about personal space? In what ways?
12. Some people believe that everyone from one region behaves in the same way. Why do such stereotypes continue to exist, and how can we challenge them?
13. Should schools and companies teach people about different habits of personal space? What are the benefits and the risks?
14. Is personal space more important to you now than when you were a child? Why or why not?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/personal-space** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.